

Enmeshed in a Bank of Nair

By
Forrest Halsey

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MAN must live," thought De Bracy. He stood at the window. Far below the checkerboard of streets was beginning to be studied by the firefly lights of cabs and motors. The dull brown of the park forced into brilliancy by arc-lights was like some country waltz painted for the town. In the north the searchlight of the Albany night-boat pushed a moving, luminous finger into the clouds. The notes of a street-organ came to him, softened by distance into melody.

And 'twas there that Annie Laurie Gave me her promise true. He smiled with shut lips. "Her promise true," he said. "I wonder why I think of old times to-night?" According to the clubs and drawing-rooms Oliver Van Corlear De Bracy thought little of old times and less of an old name. Still, his world recognized

"I don't make calls. We can do business, I guess." The younger man flapped open the lid of a bronze cigarette-casket, but a paper roll in his teeth, and turning his back on the other, puffed at the flame of a Roman hearth altar, tended by a vestal virgin in bronze.

"That depends," he said between puffs. "On what?" said the older man. "You?" said De Bracy. "Me? How? Ain't my credit good?" the ghost of a smile flickering on the adamant of his eyes.

"Your credit financially, Mr. Williams, does not concern me. Mr. Harburger is responsible if he sends you." "I'll be hanged," said John Williams. De Bracy smiled and waved his hand—the gesture might mean anything. "Sit down, Mr. Williams; I will explain," he said seriously. "Will you smoke? No?" He seated himself in a large chair, bending forward and looking into the other's eyes with cool directness.

"This time I am armed, however, dear Blanche." The young man-servant re-entered. "Waters," said De Bracy, "how much wages do I owe you?"

The young fellow flushed and looked at his master with a crooked smile of embarrassment. "There's no hurry, Mr. De Bracy, sir," he deprecated. The amusement showed in the De Bracy eyes. "You never will make a valet, Waters," he said. "I owe you three months' wages, as you know. Dress me and then you may go for the night. You will want some money; pawn this ring. Now that we have a balance in the bank we can afford to disregard appearances, Waters."

Waters was a whim of De Bracy's. He had picked up the boy from the streets, and was repaid by a fiery gratitude that burned away many a barrier.

II.

"Oliver," said young Joe Williams, "you never saw such hair in your life. Jove! It fairly seems to be alive, it glows and glitters so." It was three weeks since the meeting between John Williams and Oliver Van Corlear De Bracy.

Through the red flare of the setting sun a continuous mass of carriages and cars chinked and purred through the Mall. The crisp tag of a December evening was in the air. The couple in the racing car, swathed in the disguise of their great fur coats, were skidding with whirling dash in and out of the streaming vehicles, the younger man one sense alert and watchful of his mechanism, while his subconscious self was dreaming.

To the skilled man of the world the winning of the youth's affection had been an easy matter.

As they became intimate, however, De Bracy saw more clearly the difficulties of his new case. The lady was vulnerable, the wall of her past presented a hundred points of attack; but at each masked advance De Bracy found that Mrs. Blackburn had pointed out the breach and had posted young Williams on guard.

The infatuation of the young millionaire had become so dangerous that the occasion brooked of no delay. De Bracy decided to join the pair for dinner at Claremont, towards which they were now motor-ing.

"Oliver," said the boy, "I am not poetic, but really her hair seems like the crowning glory of my life." "Look out for that carriage," said De Bracy at a startled exclamation from the machinist perched behind. "Don't let her hair get wound in your steering gear."

"Do you know, there's quite a story about her hair," continued the man at the wheel. "She always had beautiful hair, but when she was in Europe some years ago she went under the care of a great specialist who kept her shut up in a place in the Austrian Tyrol six months. He tortured her horribly, but her hair, under his treatment, became long, and thick, and wonderful, just as you'll see it to-night. But here we are, and time for a brush-up and a smoke before she comes. By the way, Oliver, do you want the car this evening? I'm going back in the brougham with Blanche."

An hour later they stood on the piazza watching the lines of vehicles discharging their occupants, who rustled up the steps to become part of the evening spectacle.

"Here she comes, Oliver," cried young Williams, hurrying toward a brougham whose big sorrel mince and dretted at the steps. "Blanche, here is Mr. De Bracy at last."

"Why, Oliver!" said a sweet, high voice. "It has been years and years."

"My dear Blanche, the years for you are but as a day," and De Bracy assisted Mrs. Redington Blackburn to alight.

"I told Joe I wanted to meet you. Joe, dear, run like a good child and see if Marie has come. I told her to bring some heavier wraps. Inquire at the office."

Joseph disappeared, and under De Bracy's guidance Mrs. Blackburn trailed her languid faces to the table whose orchid exuberance proclaimed Joseph's devotion. With a supple sweep of her long gloves, watching the man opposite through the fringe of her lashes, "Oliver," said the woman, "we have three minutes while that boy searches for a mythical maid. We know each other. I have followed your career; am one who has read the headlines knows mine. You are not in this for nothing. Tell me, what do you want? What is your price? Is it peace or war? If it is peace, Oliver—she learned forward, the old perfume of iris, enfolding him, her lips just fluttering with the words, her eyes violet wells of meaning under her burnished hair—"that is a golden city. Help me and I will lend you the key."

"My dear Blanche," said the man easily, "ten years ago you led me into hell, and left me, locking the gate. You are not to be trusted with keys, Blanche."

She leaned back, her lips a painted smile. "Your residence in hell has taught you to make your living, Oliver," she said.

"Then pardon me if I make it," he answered, smiling. "All is fair in two things. We failed at the love, let us try war, my dear Blanche." She laughed with an accent like thin glass snapping.

"I'm glad to see you two getting on so well—what's the joke?" said Joseph, behind them.

"Mr. De Bracy wishes the orchestra to play 'Annie Laurie.' I have so many amusing recollections connected with that song," she laughed. "Ask them to play it, like a dear boy," said Mrs. Redington Blackburn.

"Well," said Joseph a couple of hours later, "we must be trotting. I'm so glad I brought you people together again. I knew you'd like each other. I've never spent a jollier evening in my life—we must have a lot of them. Blanche, it's a pity your maid didn't bring you heavier wraps. Come, Oliver, and see us to our carriage."

"Yes, Oliver," said Mrs. Blackburn, rising. "I intend to see a lot of you from now on."

"My dear Blanche, I shall be always at your heels," laughed De Bracy.

III.

"Mr. De Bracy, sir," Waters laid the flesh-brush on the long marble massage-slab let into the tiled wall.

De Bracy, swathed in toweling like a monk, stood on the first step of his sunken bath. The last few days he had tasted defeat to its dregs. The battle had been decided to the lady. Never in a life of fighting and maneuvering had he been so out-manoeuvred and out-fought. The announcement of the engagement was now imminent.

"I am beaten," thought De Bracy, "and by a bank of hair."

"Mr. De Bracy, sir," said Waters again.

"Yes," said that gentleman.

"I took them flowers to the lady at the St. Agatha yesterday. She wasn't in. Her maid said she and Mr. Williams was motor-ing. The maid was quitting and I helped her carry her boxes to the car. And Mr. De Bracy, sir—the valet's blue, boyish eyes were sparks of excitement."

At first De Bracy hardly paid attention to the valet's story, but as it progressed he became attentive, questioning the man sharply in places, making him repeat in others.

"Waters," said De Bracy finally, "you never will make a valet, but you have your uses. Calm your excitement and remember your massage lessons!"

Fresh from the attempts of Waters, immaculately groomed, orchid in buttonhole, an introspective eye behind his monocle, De Bracy strolled down to his club.

It was within a week of Christmas. Here and there a holly wreath hung its green suggestion against the lace window-curtains. Even the servants at the club seemed to have a silent obsequious hint of favors to come.

A breakfast of unusual length was followed by a brooding hour in the darkest corner of the reading-room. It was not until almost noon that he signalled the doorman for a cab and drove to a bird and animal store on Eighth avenue. Here De Bracy descended and was gone some time, returning with an amused man carrying a large cage, which was bestowed in the bottom of the hansom.

"Yes, sir," said the man, "it can be done easy. I'll be up to-night and every night. You'll see how quick they get wise. Norfolk-Arundale, eight o'clock. I'll be there on the dot."

The cab drove away. "Well, of all the Christmas gifts!" grinned the man on the curb. "Them swells is nutty."

The next morning while De Bracy was still in bed, the elder Williams was announced. The misalliance breaker pushed away his breakfast tray with a groan. "Let him in, Waters," he said. "In five minutes call me to the telephone. Put the cigarettes on the bed-table. Now, show him in."

De Bracy leaned back against his pillows, blond, imperturbable, cigarette in teeth, the morning papers with their head-lines announcing young Williams' engagement spread before him. The door opened.

"Good morning, Mr. Williams," said De Bracy. The old man entered and walked directly to the bed-side.

"I congratulate you, Mr. De Bracy," he said.

"Me?" with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, you." The old face was the color of yellow wax, the mouth a thin gash of a smile.

"You played me very neat—tricked me very smoothly," said the level voice. "How much did she promise you?"

De Bracy struck a match.

"Now," continued the old man, "you've done what ain't been done to me for twenty years—tricked me. You gave it out to the reporters yourself last night. Clever of you, wasn't it? But you won't laugh long. You don't know me. You and your woman, you won't drag that boy where you two are. You shan't have him. I can't fight your way, but out where I come from we think a man's got a soul, and we guard our own. We don't let your kind get 'em. We've got a way of our own with your kind."

"Mr. Williams," said De Bracy, "even when you think the train is going off the track it is not wise to hit the engineer on the head. He may know his business. Any way, you don't. I don't make confidants of my clients. I told you I would smash this engagement and I shall do it at a supper I'm going to give on Christmas Eve. That's all I will tell you. Your business is to be quiet and sign checks, or else handle the matter in any way your mining-camp training suggests. Now go. I'm a busy man this morning."

IV.

"Do you know, Oliver, I think it's the kindest thing of you to give us this Christmas Eve supper," said young Williams as he stood in the anteroom of his friend De Bracy's apartments a week later.

"You're a trump," said the young man.

"There may be truth in that," laughed his companion, "but remember that not the least of my reasons for giving this affair is I wish you happiness—you see, I know Mrs. Blackburn."

"Thank you," said the youth. "Oliver, you're the best friend man ever had. Say, old man, what's that thing scratching around in the next room. Sounds like a—"

"Never mind," laughed De Bracy, "it is a surprise."



SHE HAD COPIED TIEPOLO'S "WOMAN IN GREEN."

—and Joe, you know this supper is to be a copy in costume of Tiepolo's 'Supper of Leonardo,' so I am going to give your fiancée a Christmas present. I want you to make her wear it to-night. It is an Italian head-net of the period. It will be beautiful in her hair."

V.

The progress of an unusual social event was attested by the dense crowd about the lighted awnings of the Saint Mammon on Christmas Eve.

Upon entering, the guests were hoisted in lifts to the dressing rooms, where twentieth century wraps discarded, revealed sixteenth century Florentines. Before comparisons could be made they were hurried to the ante-room of the large ball-room of the Saint Mammon. The lights here were so dim as to obscure all but the faint gleam of bare shoulders and

the smolder of gems. Fed by mystery, expectation grew to a subdued murmur as group after group laughingly entered the gloom.

"Noble Florentines," said a voice from the darkness when the last couple entered. "My Lord Leonardo, hearing that a company of brave cavaliers and beautiful ladies driven from Florence by the storm, had taken refuge in his possessions, has hidden you in all courtesy, as it is his duty to do so. He wishes you to dine with him and pass the day from noon to the set of sun in the pergola of a villa on the hills overlooking Ravenna. Here various joys, gentle, wonderful and pleasant things shall be done for your amusement and in special honor of a young lord, his friend, and a gentle lady."

"Signores and signore, enter, the feast is spread." Stringed music began to play and the curtains forming the whole back of the room were drawn away, revealing in a flood of light what had been the grand ballroom of the Saint Mammon.

A deep "Oh!" of long drawn wonder came from the crowd on the threshold.

The ballroom had disappeared. A stone floor of black and white mosaic extended to a terrace wall of old Italian marble, over which climbed and blew hundreds of roses on their vines. Two massive columns supported a roof of lattice work that hid the ceiling and on this and hanging from it in huge profusion glistened masses of purple grapes. The yellow light of noon sifting through the grape leaves dappled the terrace with moving shadows and glinted in prismatic colors from the antique gold, silver, and Venetian glass of a table covered with altar lace that stood against the rose-covered wall. Beyond, clear etched in summer sunshine, mile on mile the olive vineyards stretched to the red roofs of Ravenna.

Butterflies dipped among the roses. On long golden perches tropic birds preened vivid wings. A lithe young Saracen, his bare arms and legs clasped by silver bands, knelt in a corner tending some hawks who shook their gilded blinkers at a monkey chained by a jeweled girle to the terrace wall.

De Bracy stood indicating the seating of his guests. Young Williams and his fiancée entered, the woman a pace in advance—she had copied Tiepolo's "Woman in Green," and over her splendid hair she wore a head-net of diamonds and old cameos. Without waiting for De Bracy's hand, she swept to the head of the table.

Hour after hour, marked by changing shadows and struck by distant church bells, the dinner went on. Tumblers, jugglers, fortune-tellers, poets, wrestlers, capered, sang and made their appeal. Finally, the curtains parted, revealing the greatest tenor of the age, "Ave Maria," he sang.

The monkey clasped his chain and chattered. De Bracy signalled the young Sara en. "Take him out," he said.

The Saracen bent, loosened the monkey's chain, made a misstep and fell.

"He's got away! Catch him!" shouted Waters.

A cry from the women and a fury-flash leapt upon the table—scream on scream, as the monkey flew its length and sprang straight at the head of Mrs. Redington Blackburn—an explosion of yell—and he jumped from her shoulders, clambering up the swinging grapevines to the roof. There he sat chattering, picking at an Italian hair-net, while all around him flowed a copper mass of glorious hair.

Below, Mrs. Redington Blackburn cast her glass into De Bracy's face. "You beast," she hissed, her face, hard, old, seamed through its cracked enamel—

his right to live, without too close an inquiry as to how he managed it.

"Gave me her promise true,"

trilled the piano. "Those mid-Victorian poets had such imaginations," mused the man at the window. "Waters, light the lamps. I am expecting a gentleman."

The room began to glow with increasing radiance as lamp after lamp cast its soft clarity upon porcelain and mahoganies. Old tapestries commenced to swim out of shadows, and low tables to glitter with silver services and shine with the jeweled confusion of snuff boxes and miniatures.

"Waters," said De Bracy, "how often have I told you that the highest light should fall on that photograph cabinet?" referring to a huge folding-screen wherein, row on row, the autographed likenesses of eminent aristocrats attested his popularity in the coronation year. "My best stage property, Waters—Control your face, man. I sometimes think I shall never make a valet of you. That's better. Is that the office calling? Hand me that dressing-gown, the Chinese one. Now, show the gentleman in—until he goes, I am not at home."

"Mr. John Williams," announced Waters, holding back the curtain.

The personality of John Williams had ever-growing menace, until now its rear penetrated every home from which like the barons of old, he exacted tribute.

"Of what use can the social mouse be to this lion of achievement?" De Bracy wondered, as he advanced to greet him.

This thought, in a different fashion, occurred to John Williams, as he gazed with a contemptuous curiosity on the man before him. Dead generations had taught him to distrust this type. The refined aquiline of the features, deeply tanned, thrown into relief by the crisp blond hair that belied the man's forty years by a good ten; the tall, slender figure in his bizarre garb of black satin, splashed by the vivid scarlet and rose pink of wonderful Eastern embroideries; the hands, long, slender, with the pointed fingers familiar in old portraits, made a picture so foreign to his usual environment that the slight confidence which had sent him on his errand disappeared. His nod had the curtness of a business man's, rebuking an over-polite clerk.

"I'm from Harburger," he said cuttingly.

"So I presume Mr.—" with a glance at the card—"Wilkins. I am very sorry, but I am afraid Mr. Harburger has made a mistake."

"My name is Williams—John Williams, of the United Milling. What mistake did he make?"

"Excuse me," said De Bracy. "My books are full, and Mr. Harburger does not send me enough clients to justify my keeping any dates open for him. As a business man, you will understand my position, Mr. Williams." The nod and smile of Oliver Van Corlear De Bracy were unmistakably a careless dismissal.

"Young man," said the other, his eyes narrowing,

"Mr. Harburger has doubtless told you," he began in a level voice, "I am a tradesman—as you are. My business is the breaking of misalliances. My clients range from the royal families of Europe to members of corporations like the billion-dollar iron trust. Now, as a business man, may I put it to you—why should I, with my books full of clients, if not as wealthy, fully as liberal as you, put them all aside because you walk in and say your name is John Williams?"

"Because, son"—John Williams leaned forward, pointing a finger expressive of the manicurist's hope, less battle with the early pick-axe—"though you dress like a bowerly fortune-teller, you're a man, and you'll help a fellow when he's stuck."

The cool gray eyes looked at the hard blue ones.

"Tell me your trouble," said De Bracy.

The older man produced a case. "Smoke?" he inquired. The other tossed his cigarette away and took a cigar.

"You've heard of my son Joe, Mr. De Bracy?" Williams continued. "You know he's been trained from his twelfth year to take my place at the head of the United Milling. He's a wonder. Invented the aero brake we use on our system. I've been handing over branch after branch to him from time to time, until now he is practically the head of the United. That is, he was—with a snap of the jaws."

He never cared for your society game. None of our crowd does. But last summer outside of Saratoga he met a broken-down auto with a woman in it. Chauffeur gone off and not come back. He tinkered the machine and took her home. Well, she's got him. He's gone wild over her. Runs around pouring out money, neglecting business, writing her poems. Yes, sir, the manager of the United Milling! Think of it! Poems to her hair; I've seen 'em! Crazy over her hair; says it's the most wonderful in the world. My God! Think of talking that way about a woman! And now he's fixin' to marry her—a lady that's old enough to have rocked and spanked him, and ain't straight at that—three husbands cancelled by the courts. She's one of your women. She'll take him away from us, and the United Milling. She laughs at my wife, damn her! at my wife! She even laughs at me—John Williams—and she's got me dead to rights. It's killin' his mother. That's the reason I come to you, Mr. De Bracy."

"What is her name?" asked De Bracy.

"Her latest label is Mrs. Blanche Redington Blackburn," said the older man.

"I accept your commission, Mr. Williams," said De Bracy.

"I've always said that two real men can get together easy in business or scrapping," said Joe other, producing a check-book. "Let me have a pen. The ink's dry in mine."

De Bracy stood watching the curtain that still trembled with the exit of his visitor. His face hard, haggard, the mouth a cruel scar.

"Gave me her promise true," he murmured.

Next Week. A Long Way From Broadway

By
GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER